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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 BOGOTA 009311

SIPDIS

STATE PLEASE PASS TO USTR - CLATANOFF
GENEVA FOR DELAURENTIS AND CHAMBERLIN
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E.O. 12958: DECL: 09/13/2014

TAGS: [ELAB](#) [PHUM](#) [PGOV](#) [ETRD](#) [PTER](#) [CO](#) [ILO](#)

SUBJECT: ILO STUDY: REMOVING POLITICS FROM LABOR RELATIONS
REDUCES VIOLENCE AND STRENGTHENS DIALOGUE

REF: A. BOGOTA 3866

[B](#). BOGOTA 3913

[C](#). BOGOTA 4950

[D](#). BOGOTA 3736

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Milton K. Drucker for
reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

Summary

[1](#)1. (C) The relationship between labor violence and political activity is widely accepted by labor leaders and academics in Colombia. For many trade unionists, unions act as surrogate political parties and avenues for political activity. Because illegal armed groups perceive trade unionists, particularly teachers, as political actors, some labor leaders have actively discouraged trade union involvement in political activity. Using actual case studies, a report prepared by the DOL-funded ILO technical cooperation program in Colombia concludes that removing politics from labor relations can play an important role in improving tripartite dialogue and reducing levels of violence against trade unionists and management. In three of the report's seven case studies, the exclusion of politics from labor relations and the elimination of pressure from illegal armed groups facilitated greater cooperation between unions and identification of common ground between labor and management. The report also presents potential strategies, which might be employed to reduce violence against trade unionists. End Summary.

Linkage of Politics and Labor Relations Hurts Unions

[1](#)2. (C) The political orientation of some Colombian labor unions has been the subject of several academic studies that attribute the overt linkage of politics and labor relations in Colombia to a historical absence of strong political parties. According to Fabio Zapata (protect), Human Rights Director for the Colombian Federation of Educators (FECODE), Colombia's left-wing labor unions, particularly those affiliated with the United Workers Central (CUT), do not make a distinction between political activity and labor activism; the former is part and parcel of the latter. Carlos Rodriguez (strictly protect), President of the CUT, has repeatedly told us that left-wing activists within the CUT see Colombia's political parties as corrupt or, at best, unrepresentative of Colombian workers. Rodriguez has worked diligently throughout his tenure as CUT President -- largely without success -- to press union members to make a distinction between politics and labor activism (ref A). He maintains that the linkage harms union leaders by increasing the risk of violence against them, alienating potential union members whose political views differ from union leadership, and diverting attention from traditional labor priorities.

[1](#)3. (C) According to Norberto Rios (protect), director of the National Labor College ("Escuela Nacional Sindical," or ENS), a well respected Colombian labor rights NGO, paramilitaries target labor leaders for violence primarily because they perceive them to be, at best, members of the radical political opposition, or, at worst, covert guerrilla collaborators. Moreover, ENS statistics show that paramilitaries disproportionately target members of the CUT, Colombia's most left-leaning and politically activist labor federation (ref B). Carlos Jose Guarnizo (protect), a project coordinator in the ILO's technical cooperation program in Bogota, told the Embassy that the intrusion of partisan politics into labor relations contributes to violence against representatives of both labor and management. Although not generally noted by Colombian human rights activists, business leaders and managers are often the victims of kidnappings, threats of violence, and extortion attempts by paramilitary and guerrilla groups, for both political and economic reasons.

Politically Active Teachers Targeted

14. (C) Forty-one of the 90 trade unionists murdered in 2003 were teachers. Many more teachers were threatened by illegal armed groups or voluntarily displaced to other locations in order to escape violence. Of the estimated 312,000 teachers in Colombia, approximately 270,000 are members of FECODE, a CUT affiliate. Most of the others belong to independent teachers' unions not affiliated with FECODE. According to FECODE's Zapata, illegal armed groups target teachers primarily because they believe teachers disseminate propaganda in the classroom. FECODE's 2003 human rights report states that educators are targeted because of their vocal opposition to forced recruitment of children by illegal armed groups, their pedagogical, labor, and community leadership, and paramilitary and guerrilla perceptions that teachers are "enemy collaborators." In a recent meeting with the Embassy, Zapata, who drafted the report, told us illegal armed groups consider unionized teachers to be political, rather than economic, actors, regardless of whether they actually engage in political activities. Zapata attributes this perception to the prevalence of left-wing political activism within FECODE. The Presidential Program for Human Rights is working with FECODE and local teachers unions to design a nationwide program to assist and protect at-risk teachers (septel).

Absence of Politics Opens Space for Dialogue

15. (U) A report recently published by the DOL-funded ILO technical cooperation program in Colombia -- buttressed by three of the report's seven case studies -- provides evidence that the exclusion of political themes from union demands can improve the quality of dialogue and reduce violence perpetrated against trade unionists. In some cases, partisan and non-partisan unions previously divided by political differences were able to cooperate in negotiations with employers after the politicized unions abandoned ideological approaches. In other cases, the removal of vague political ideals helped union leaders articulate concrete, tangible demands they could explain to rank-and-file workers and negotiate more effectively with management. Ultimately, the abandonment of left-wing politics convinced both labor and management that they were not negotiating with "the enemy," but with a common partner. This development helped both sides identify common interests and understand the other's position.

Case Study #1: Banana Strike in Uraba

16. (U) The Uraba region of northwestern Antioquia department has long been characterized by a heavy presence of guerrilla and paramilitary groups, many of which engage in narcotics and weapons trafficking. For decades, the region's banana growers -- plantation owners and laborers alike -- have been caught in the crossfire. The Uraba banana industry employs approximately 17,600 laborers working on 344 farms that range from small producers to large-scale agribusiness. Paramilitaries and guerrillas, including the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and National Liberation Army (ELN), traditionally exerted pressure on workers, managers, owners, and the general population, often at the expense of labor relations in the industry. According to the ILO report, guerrilla infiltration of the region's unions in the 1980s and early 1990s resulted in the extortion of business leaders, sabotage and theft of crops and plantation property, and, ultimately, paramilitary attacks against banana workers.

17. (U) According to the ILO report, a stronger state presence and a series of successful demobilization programs have reduced the influence of illegal armed groups and contributed to improved labor relations in the region, including a reduction in violence. The report states that labor and management, no longer separated by a political divide, have realized that each is necessary to the other's survival and that they must work together. The industry's eight labor unions now negotiate jointly with the primary growers' association. A sixteen-day strike in June was characterized by record low levels of violence, despite high levels of tension and significant crop loss. Over the course of the strike, banana growers lost an estimated USD 25.5 million. The 16,000 striking workers lost an estimated USD 5.4 million. When President Uribe and acting Vice-Minister for Labor Affairs Mauricio Rubio traveled to Uraba to mediate between labor and management, the issues on the table were bread-and-butter labor concerns, permitting the Government to successfully pressure both sides to meet halfway over the course of a one-evening negotiating session.

Case Study #2: Chevron Texaco

18. (U) The ILO report describes the state of play in labor relations within Chevron Texaco facilities in Colombia in 2000. Employees were represented by two labor unions, SINTRACHEVRONTEX and the Syndicated Workers Union ("Union Sindical Obrero," or USO). The former split away from the latter in 1998 primarily because of disagreements over USO's political orientation and aggressive tactics. The technical cooperation program conducted workshops for leaders of both unions in 2000 and 2001 and worked with labor and management to set up a permanent conciliation commission in which management explains the company's business plan and priorities and organized labor presents concerns about workplace issues. Discussion of national oil policy and other political issues is off-limits. As a result of the technical cooperation program's efforts, the two unions set aside their political differences and now jointly present labor concerns to management. Collective negotiations conducted since 2002 have been resolved quickly with a focus on traditional labor relations. The Chevron Texaco case study contrasts sharply with the May "political strike" declared by USO in protest of the GOC's restructuring of Ecopetrol, Colombia's state-owned oil company (ref C).

Case Study #3: Cementos Nare

19. (U) According to the ILO report, conflict between Cementos Nare, which operates in the municipalities of Nare and Caracoli, Antioquia Department, and organized labor escalated in the 1970s when the Colombian Confederation of Unions (CSTC), a Communist labor union, convinced labor unions to take a more radical stance, oriented in the idea of class struggle, against management. (CSTC and the radical Colombian Workers Union (UTC) merged to form the CUT in 1986.) Increased guerrilla activity in the region in the 1980s radicalized labor unions even further. Between the 1970s and 1990s, violence against organized labor and management in the region escalated. In 1986, Cementos Nare's Director of Industrial Relations and the union's president were assassinated by illegal armed groups. In 1991, the firm closed its plant for 25 days after several workers were murdered. The firm reopened the plant with the proviso that further violence would result in permanent closure. The ILO report posits 1991 as a turning point in labor relations. Levels of violence declined substantially throughout the 1990s as the firm increased social benefits for workers and social investment in the community and rank-and-file union members gradually voted the union's radical leadership out. Once workers' interests began to take precedence over political demands, levels of violence diminished quickly.

Comment

110. (C) The ILO study does more than support our conclusions about the nature of labor violence in Colombia, for it demonstrates that GOC strategies to strengthen state presence and demobilize illegal armed actors have played a role in the reduction of violence against trade unionists. The ENS itself acknowledges that the paramilitary peace process has played the most significant role in the striking decline of violence against trade unionists (ref D) over the last 18 months. The ILO study provides models for future action through which unions may be convinced to leave politics to Colombia's political parties and focus instead on labor relations and the promotion of traditional labor priorities. Funding for the DOL-financed technical cooperation program will run out in May 2005. We urge that serious consideration be given to extending this program or funding other programs -- perhaps under FTA-related capacity building assistance -- that will use the ILO's findings to develop sector-specific plans of action to reduce labor violence and improve labor relations.
DRUCKER